Escalante Massacre

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The province of Negros Occidental is a province made prosperous by the sugar industry. For hundreds of years, in a history that began during the Spanish colonial period, it had exported sugar and sugar products. Because owning sugar plantations proved very lucrative, land gradually became concentrated and under the control of the elite, the sugar planters or *hacenderos,* who became extremely rich and powerful. The great majority, on the other hand, were dispossessed of their land and earned their living as farm labor, or *sacadas.* They were poor, often severely exploited, powerless, and on top of everything else, landless.
Social tension was always high in the province because of this situation. Frequently, Negros was described as a social volcano waiting to explode.

In the late 1970s, world sugar prices collapsed. Across Negros, production had slowed down or worse, stood still. Half a million farm workers lost their livelihoods and hundreds of thousands of children faced hunger and death.

Negros and the Marcos Dictatorship

The regime of Ferdinand Marcos (1972-1986) super-imposed itself on this seething social volcano in Negros.

By itself, the regime had perpetrated terrorism in the Philippine countryside by ordering successive military operations, sending a stream of often abusive soldiers, killing and pillaging their way in the rural areas.

Armando Gustilo, one of Negros' most powerful sugar planters and warlords, was himself a little dictator in northern Negros. His private army was said to number 1,500, which he wielded to strike terror in the hearts of his province mates.

Gustilo was congressman since 1963. When Marcos shut down Congress after he made himself a dictator, he made Gustilo governor of Negros Occidental. With Marcos and a powerful army behind him, Gustilo's power knew no limits.

For the *sacadas* in Negros, life under the martial law regime – deceptively called the New Society – became much worse than the "old" society it claimed to replace. Farm wages stayed very low. Marcos promised to break up land monopolies and distribute land to the landless, causing a few to hope, but the promises remained on paper. Soldiers and paramilitary forces (Citizens' Home Defense Forces or CHDF) stalked rural Negros, stealing from people, burning villages, and kidnapping and assassinating local farm leaders.
When the sugar crisis exploded in the late 1970s, the sacadas, and even a small number of enlightened landowners, said they have had enough. This triggered many protest marches, demanding agrarian reform and land distribution, fair wages and improved government services.

Welgang Bayan

By the mid-1980s, especially in the wake of the assassination of the former senator Benigno Aquino Jr., Negros Occidental, as elsewhere in the Philippines, wanted system change, foremost being the dismantling of the Marcos dictatorship. In Negros, people in both urban and rural areas, joined protest activities in great numbers, raising their voices and fists to demand democracy and justice from the government.

By 1985, the 13th year of the Marcos dictatorship, a nationwide movement called for coordinated protests on the occasion of the 13th anniversary of the declaration of martial law. It was called the *Welgang Bayan* (general strike), with participants from most cities and towns, north to south of the country.

Northern Negros – the kingdom of Armando Gustilo — responded eagerly to this call by organizing its own three-day *welgang bayan.* It was to start on the 19th and end on the 21st of September at the town of New Escalante, 95 kilometers north of Bacolod City, the provincial capital. Thousands joined the strike, including residents of the city of Cadiz, seat of Gustilo's power.

On the night of the 18th of September, the eve of the three-day action, protesters began with an overnight vigil in front of the Escalante town hall.

On the morning of the 19th of September, Day One of the Escalante *Welgang Bayan,* people poured in to join the protest action. They came from the town centers and from far-flung areas. They were farmers and farm workers, fisherfolk, young and old, men and women,

students, teachers, nuns, priests and seminarians. Some came marching in groups. Others brought their families and neighbors. Still others came by themselves. Many brought baskets of food with them, as well as change of clothing, intending to stay during the planned three days of protest.

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By Day Two, the 20th of September, protesters filled the roads to the Escalante town hall. They held banners, gave speeches, and chanted slogans. Fully-armed soldiers, policemen, and paramilitary forces (CHDF) surrounded them. Firetrucks were ready to disperse the crowd. A machine gun also stood at the rooftop of the town hall, ready to spew fire. At around noon, the fire trucks blasted water on the ranks of protesters but failed to break the protest line. Some protesters even exchanged wisecracks about enjoying the "free bath."
After the water cannons came tear gas. The protesters, particularly those in the frontlines, linked their arms, chanting: "*Bigas, hindi tear gas*! (We need rice, not teargas!)" They also told each other: *"Makibaka, huwag matakot!* (Struggle, keep fear at bay!)."
Then came the bullets.

It was about an hour past noon, rallyists remember. The firing was totally one sided, all coming from the CHDF, the police, and the soldiers. As it happened, the protesters massed in front of the town hall were mostly *sacadas* and a few student leaders. Several farmworkers and one student leader were killed instantly. Others tried to run to the canefields and ricefields lying next the town hall. But the armed forces pursued them, shooting several more dead. Twenty in all were slain that day, with bullet wounds mostly on the back and the side.

Indignation, Impunity

Terror spread in Escalante after this, so far, worst case of repression the town had ever seen. Many residents grew angry too. The Marcos dictatorship faced angry and disgusted reactions from all over the Philippines and the rest of the world. Priests and bishops came to Escalante to express solidarity. This abuse, they said, had to stop. The regime of the Marcos dictatorship had to end.

Five months later, with the EDSA People Power revolt, Marcos, his cronies and relatives fled the country, ending a 14-year violent dictatorship.

Escalante never forgot this Bloody Thursday in its history. Every year since then, it has held commemoration activities for these martyrs to democracy. A monument to these martyrs has also been erected, almost on the same spot in the plaza that had been marked by the blood of their sacrifice.

Of the truly guilty, however, none have been tried or punished. A military officer who had been implicated in the killings rose to higher posts but three low-ranking policemen were found guilty and suffered imprisonment for 18 years. In Negros itself, land ownership

continues to be concentrated among a few families, and landlords have kept their private armies and huge arsenals.

Gustilo died in the US, never made to answer for the terror he had sowed in Escalante.

Escalante Martyrs

ALEGRE, William
DAYANAN, Michael
DEMEGILIO, Rodney
FRANCO, Rovena
JARAVELLO, Juvelyn
LABATOS, Alex
LAPE, Angelina
LOCANILAO, Norberto
MAHINAY, Rodolfo
MEGALLEN, Rogelio Jr.
MONARES, Claro
MONDEJAR, Maria Luz

MONTEALTO, Rodolfo
ORNOPIA, Aniano
OROT, Nenita
SALILI, Edgardo
SANTA ANA, Ronilo
SUAREZ, Juanito Jr.
TAN, Manuel
TEJONES, Caesar

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